**The River Never Sleeps**

*By Martha Agoonguk Art by Gary Undercuffler*

Grandfather had warned Xavier not to go out on the Yukon that day. But about a hundred yards from the willow-choked shore, kneeling by a small hole cut in the thick ice, were Xavier Beans and his cousin John Ianutuk.

Xavier searched through his red backpack for his tackle box. His cousin, who always seemed to be quicker at everything, had already dropped his fishing line into the bronze water rushing beneath the hole.

"You should have been there, John. It was scary! Grandfather looked right at me and said, ‘Beware! The river never sleeps!’”

"How would you know that? You don't talk Inuit!"

Sometimes John was such a know-it-all, thought Xavier. Still, it was true. Grandfather had moved in with Xavier's family after Grandmother Beans had died last month. And even though Xavier had learned some Inuit words, he needed his mother to translate most of the throat-clearing sounds of Grandfather's speech.

"He said we shouldn't go out on the ice because this year has been just like the year our great-uncle Ignatius drowned during an early breakup."

"That was fifty years ago!" John jigged his line roughly, a disgusted look on his face. "What does that old man know? Breakup won't come for weeks."

Though the pale spring sun was warm on his face, Xavier shivered. Breakup was exciting. The river cracked with noises like gunshots. Sheets of ice, some as big as houses, broke loose and smashed and tumbled downstream toward the Bering Sea. And the whole time there was this loud tinkling, as if the river were filled with a million giant ice cubes. . . .

Where was his lure? Xavier turned the red backpack upside down, spilling everything out on the ice.

"What's all that junk?" asked John.

"It's not junk! It's what the men used to carry with them on hunts in the old days."

When Grandfather had moved in with them, he had brought along a scarred old sealskin bag. Inside it were hand-carved tusk harpoon tips and jigging lures, and coils of spotted-seal thongs and straps. There was a crinkly seal-intestine raincoat and a walrus-gut sack that Grandfather would fill with snow and slip under his parka so that the snow would melt into drinking water.

Xavier had hung the water bag and the brittle raincoat in the snowmobile shed. His grandfather had allowed him to put the other gear in his red backpack along with his fishing tackle and scout knife.

At the bottom of the pile Xavier found the plastic box with his hooks and weights, three sparkle-stones, and the cool, smooth ivory lures carved by Grandfather many years before.

Xavier was rigging his line when John shouted, "Hey, a bite! I've got one!"

As Xavier ran to help him pull a large wriggling sheefish through the small hole, he heard a loud crack, like a rifle shot.

"What was that?" he asked, but John was busy with his fish and didn't answer. *Crack!* Xavier heard the noise again. The air suddenly smelled damp and swampy.

He glanced around. Upstream, where the river curved into view, was a channel of open water. In it bobbed an iceberg as big as a gray whale! Almost in slow motion, it collided with the ice on the near side of the river, the side closest to them. When it hit, there was a loud chime, as if someone had struck a huge glass with a table knife. A new streaming layer of ice broke free, and both floes began surging downstream . . . toward them!

"Breakup! Breakup's started, John. Let's get out of here!"

"But my fish! It's a fat one!"

"Leave it! Cut it loose!" Xavier shouted as he jammed Grandfather's things into the backpack.

The boys turned toward shore, rushing to get off the river. John tripped on a patch of rough ice. He tried to stand but yelped in pain. "I think I twisted something!"

Xavier struggled to support John, who was almost a head taller than he was. The backpack kept slipping from his shoulders and tangling his legs. He dumped the bag on the ice to get a better hold on John.

They moved more easily then, but the hundred yards to shore was like miles as they heard the fracturing ice explode behind them. Xavier knew that the farthest sections, the ice nearest the open water, would go first, but in the past he'd seen whole sections of "safe" shore ice unexpectedly buckle and shoot straight up in the air. The ice under their feet could do the same thing! *Hurry. Hurry*, he thought.

They slid and stumbled. Twice they fell. The last few yards they crawled. Hearts pounding, they collapsed at last on the muddy, solid shore.

John suddenly tried to get to his feet. "What about your grandfather's gear? It can't be replaced! We should try to get it back."

"No! It's too dangerous." Xavier blinked hard as he looked out across the ice at the red backpack. "He'll understand."

He might even be glad, Xavier thought. At least I'm alive to tell him about the day I learned that the river never sleeps.

1. What happens while the boys are rushing across the ice trying to get to the shore?
2. John catches a large fish.
3. Xavier tries to find his lure.
4. John falls and hurts himself.
5. Xavier sees an iceberg crash.
6. What is the MAIN problem in the passage?
7. Xavier loses his supplies while fishing on the ice.
8. John is upset because he is unable to keep the fish he caught.
9. Grandfather is upset that Xavier and John disobeyed his warnings.
10. Xavier and John must outrun the ice breakups and make it safely to solid land.
11. Why is the setting important to the main problem in the passage?
12. Xavier and John are stuck on an iceberg traveling down the river.
13. Xavier and John are fishing on ice that is unsafe because of breakups.
14. Xavier and John live in a fishing village and the boys are not catching any fish.
15. Xavier and John live in an Inuit village and the boys have trouble understanding the language their grandfather speaks.
16. Xavier and John solve their problem by
17. going back for the backpack once they realize it is gone.
18. working together to help each other get safely on the shore.
19. using the special items that their grandfather made to catch fish.
20. keeping their experience on the ice a secret from their grandfather.
21. Why is it important that the story is set in the spring?
22. It is too cold to go fishing in the wintertime.
23. The warming weather causes the ice to breakup.
24. The fish are more active when the sun is shining.
25. Inuit people are only allowed to fish during certain times.
26. Read the sentence from the passage.

**And even though Xavier had learned some Inuit words, he needed his mother to translate most of the throat-clearing sounds of his grandfather’s speech.**

What does the word *translate* mean as used in the sentence above?

1. to respect the language of elders
2. to understand a difficult language
3. to teach someone to speak another language
4. to explain the meaning of a word from another language
5. According to the passage, which event happened FIRST?
6. Great-Uncle Ignatius drowned.
7. Grandfather warns Xavier to stay off the ice.
8. John wants to go back and get the backpack from the ice.
9. Xavier sees an iceberg crash into the ice where they are fishing.
10. With which statement would the author MOST LIKELY agree?
11. Fishing on the ice is safe only in the winter.
12. Children should learn the native language of their family.
13. You should keep your belongings with you even if you are in danger.
14. It is important to follow warnings from others who want to keep you safe.
15. Which sentence from the passage BEST describes what is happening in the second illustration?
16. “Breakup! Breakup’s started, John. Let’s get out of here.”
17. He tried to stand but yelped in pain. “I think I twisted something!”
18. Xavier was rigging his line when John shouted, “Hey, a bite! I’ve got one!”
19. “Leave it! Cut it loose!” Xavier shouted as he jammed Grandfather’s things into the backpack.
20. Which word BEST describes Grandfather?
21. careful
22. caring
23. hopeful
24. wise

Answer Key:

1. Correct Answer C, DOK 2
2. Correct Answer D, DOK 2
3. Correct Answer B, DOK 2
4. Correct Answer B, DOK 2
5. Correct Answer B, DOK 3
6. Correct Answer D, DOK 2
7. Correct Answer A, DOK 1
8. Correct Answer D, DOK 1
9. Correct Answer A, DOK 2
10. Correct Answer D, DOK 2